

Parliament of Victoria: Legislative Council Environment and Planning Committee

Inquiry into the 2022 Flood Event in Victoria

Submission by Rural Councils Victoria

2 June 2023

Who we are and who we represent

Rural Councils Victoria (RCV) is an incorporated body representing 34 smaller rural councils across country Victoria.

Our membership does not include regional cities, so our focus is on issues relevant to smaller rural areas some of which are isolated or sparsely populated.

One in nine Victorians live in rural communities and are served by rural councils.

In Victoria, 38 of the 79 councils are classified as 'rural', including a number on the urban fringe.

Victoria's rural councils are responsible for 79 per cent of Victoria's land area and have a combined population of about 836,000 (ABS 2020), 12.5 per cent of Victoria's population.

Context

Communities, families, individuals, and businesses across rural Victoria have been adversely affected by the floods of 2022/23. In many rural areas, roads have been washed out and/or been so badly damaged that they are unusable.

Prior to the floods, many rural roads were already in a shocking state of disrepair.

A survey of rural mayors conducted by RCV in 2022 **before** the floods, found that the state of the local roads network was the number one priority for mayors and their local communities. After the floods, which left some communities isolated, the state of local roads, bridges and other infrastructure is seen as even more pertinent.

Individual Rural Council Victoria member councils will be making their own submissions.

Causes of and contributors to the flood event

The Theory of Anthropogenic Climate Change is accepted by credible scientific experts.

The Bureau of Meteorology reports that for the past three years, La Niña – which is part of a natural cycle known as the El Niño-Southern Oscillation (ENSO) – has led to increased rainfall across much of Australia.

BoM reports that El Niño ([which is projected to recommence soon](#)) will lead to drier conditions over large parts of Australia, with increased risk of bushfires.

More information is available on the Bureau of Meteorology's [Australian Climate Influences web page](#).

Experts say that the severity of the flood event was due to the confluence of the natural ENSO and anthropogenic global climate change, other human actions or lack of actions also played a role in exacerbating the impacts of the flood event.

Inadequate mitigation and preparation

A lack of adequate mitigation and preparation measures contributed to the severity of the event for vulnerable families and communities and for infrastructure, such as buildings, roads, bridges and homes.

For instance, RCV member councils – many of which were also been hit by the 2019-2020 bushfires – have historically had extreme difficulty in convincing governments to invest in “betterment”, also known as “build back better.”

Betterment allows, and indeed encourages, councils and others, such as government, to “build back better” following natural disasters such as floods and bushfires so that infrastructure can survive the next natural disaster, saving money in the longer term.

With the warnings from the scientific community over several decades, governments should not have been surprised by a flood event of this magnitude.

With proper investment and resourcing, communities and infrastructure would have been better prepared.

Governments need to get better at betterment (Build back better)

RCV is calling on the Victorian Government to fully embrace the concept of betterment and for the State Government to advocate to the Federal Government to improve the federal betterment funding model.

Current funding arrangements do not encourage improvements in the resilience of infrastructure that are damaged during natural disasters.

Currently, funds are provided to local governments to reinstate infrastructure to the pre-disaster condition.

Resilience improvements are often not funded or only partially funded under the recovery funding program.

Improvements that would prevent or reduce damage from future natural disasters would save money in the long term.

It is recommended that recovery programs promote and incentivise the upgrade and improvement of disaster-affected infrastructure as part of the funding models.

Rural Councils Victoria argues that a large proportion of public infrastructure – such as roads, bridges, walking paths, etc – might have survived the 2022 Flooding Event in better condition if the concept of betterment had been in place and adhered to after previous natural disasters.

Some RCV member councils report that they have replaced some local infrastructure to equivalent standards following previous natural disasters. In many instances, spending more to build back to a more resilient standard would have saved money.

Rural Councils Victoria is urging governments to prioritise mitigation and betterment measures in advance of any future natural disasters.

Proactive mitigation asset assessment fund

Rural Councils Victoria is calling for the creation of a dedicated fund for resilient (pre-disaster mitigation) asset assessments.

Funding is needed for proactive assessments of assets in areas identified as prone to climate-related disasters to increase the resilience of infrastructure.

Funding would ensure rural councils have the resources available to engage suitably qualified professionals to assess and provide recommendations relating to disaster-prone infrastructure.

Local Governments could then program works through their normal capital expenditure processes or prepare site-specific funding applications to funding agencies.

Municipal Emergency Resourcing Program needs greater funding

Small rural councils don't have the resources – internal or external – to deal with emergency/disaster situations.

State government funding for emergency management preparedness to ensure rural and other communities are prepared for devastating natural disasters such as floods and bushfires is inadequate.

Mitigation and preparedness are better, safer and less costly than recovery.

Preparedness ensures that communities suffer less damage, and potentially saves lives.

As a result of climate change, the wildfire season in the northern hemisphere and the bushfire season in the southern hemisphere are now extended and overlap.

The flood seasons have also lengthened.

It is becoming increasingly difficult for firefighters from the northern hemisphere to come to Australia's assistance and hard for Australian firefighters to help North Americans and Europeans fight wildfires in the northern summer.

Proper mitigation and preparedness are essential.

Preparedness context

There are varying levels of preparedness across Victorian councils in terms of their emergency management policies and procedures and rural councils often have challenges meeting emergency management obligations under Victoria's current emergency management framework.

This is due to several constraints including budgets, resourcing and staffing issues.

The [Municipal Emergency Resourcing Program's \(MERP\)](#) is a Victorian Government program with ongoing annual funding of \$4.89 million, which is occasionally topped up (it received an extra \$1 million in 2020/21 and another \$1 million in 2021/22).

MERP "supports strategic emergency management work undertaken by rural, regional and outer-metropolitan councils".

MERP's purpose is to support "councils to plan, prepare and deliver activities that will assist their communities in an emergency".

RCV considers that the \$4.9 million allocated to the Municipal Emergency Resourcing Program is inadequate.

The scale of both the 2022 Flood Event and the 2019/2020 bushfires – as well as the future likelihood of climate change fueling natural disasters of greater intensity, MERP needs to increase significantly.

RCV contends that MERP needs to be at least tripled to provide the support that rural councils need to keep communities safe in an emergency.

Adequacy and effectiveness of early warning systems

The flood gauge system needs to be reviewed. Councils report that there was a lot of confusion as to how much water there was and when it was coming downstream.

Some councils report that flood mapping was adequate initially, but additional mapping/modelling was needed. For example, in Yarriambiack Shire additional mapping was needed for the Rupanyup/Dunmunkle creek to address community concerns.

Resources for flood monitoring needs to be reimbursed. Again, Yarriambiack carried out flood monitoring, which assisted decision-making but so far Yarriambiack has not been able to reclaim the costs.

Small and under-resourced rural councils with small rate bases across Victoria are not able to carry such costs. Reimbursement needs to occur swiftly and consistently.

Resourcing of the State Emergency Service, the adequacy of its response to the Flood Event and the adequacy of its resourcing to deal with increasing floods and natural disasters in the future

The SES does not have a presence in many small rural Victorian communities, meaning there is often a lack of local knowledge within SES during an emergency.

The SES is also facing a reduction in volunteer numbers in rural areas, which means councils are having to fill some SES roles, such as sandbagging.

Councils report that SES volunteers, where available, worked extremely hard to keep communities safe.

In larger communities, SES local knowledge and experience gained in previous flooding events was invaluable but, for the reasons state above, absent in many others areas.

The October 2022 flood event highlighted the desperate need to boost SES volunteer numbers and resourcing.

Viability of SES as lead emergency agency

Given low volunteer numbers and lack of resources, there is a potential need to reconsider the viability and sustainability of the SES as the lead agency for flood emergencies in some rural areas.

The sheer scale of the event strongly indicated that the SES would require substantial support from CFA volunteers and from councils to run a successful response campaign in future major floods.

As well as more volunteers, the SES needs more resources such as cars and other appropriate equipment if they are to deal with emergency situations such as natural disasters.

Incident Control Centres

The Incident Control Centre (ICC) manages the initial natural disaster response by police, SES and other services.

In some instances, councils noticed a lack of updated intelligence from Incident Control Centres, despite the best efforts and willingness of SES and CFA personnel.

The flood incident underlines the same concerns the 2019-20 bushfires regarding issues with strategic partnerships. Emergencies require strong strategic partnerships.

Decision-making power does not reside in local areas affected by the disaster, in some instances leading to a fragmented response.

Some shires don't have an SES service within their boundary. Critical and local knowledge is not taken into account during emergencies.

Membership of volunteer organisations are low, especially post-Covid. Small SES units in rural Victoria require better resources such as cars and other equipment.

Despite its efforts the SES as the control agency does get overwhelmed by big events.

Some rural Council areas don't have any SES presence and so are at an extreme disadvantage when it comes to dealing with a natural disaster.

Some councils are seeking a reconsideration of the role of regionally based ICCs and their capacity to equally support rural shires in a timely manner, especially when the ICC is hundreds of kilometres from where the disaster is unfolding.

Review the location, funding, maintenance and effectiveness of engineered structures, such as floodwalls, rural levees and culverts, as a flood mitigation strategy

Maintenance of infrastructure

In many instances councils report that there is no funding allocated specifically to the ongoing maintenance of engineered structures, including levees.

In some instances, the ownership or responsibility for a structure was not clear.

Channel decommissioning

Channel decommissioning has had an adverse impact on historical data outlining water flow.

State Government needs to take responsibility for ensuring its drainage infrastructure is in the appropriate location, particularly in view of channel decommissioning.

Councils, VicRoads and VicTrack have infrastructure in redundant locations and no infrastructure where natural water flows occur in a flooding event.

Use prefabricated infrastructure

Resourcing infrastructure, such as prefabricated levees for some townships, would enable human resources to be redeployed to other townships where there is less scope for mechanical intervention.

This is useful as lead agencies such as SES have few or no members in many rural towns.

Funded flood prevention scheme

A government-funded flood prevention scheme should be considered, where it can be demonstrated that an engineered structure – floodwall, levee, culvert etc – would reduce the impact of flooding on the community.

Such a scheme could also consider compulsory acquisitions of properties in an increased flood-impact zone.

Flood mapping

While the government is fully funding flood studies, **rural councils are too resource-stretched in planning** to undertake the necessary strategic planning-scheme work to implement the contemporary flood studies into their schemes.

Flood maps for much of rural Victoria are – or are in danger of being – outdated or inaccurate, leading authorities to base decisions on incorrect data and projections.

As government funding indicates, localised flood maps are needed for every area of Victoria to ensure that mitigation infrastructure such as floodwalls, levees and culverts are of the appropriate scale and in the appropriate locations.

Rural Councils Victoria is calling on the Victorian Government to provide extra resources to rural councils so that every rural area is supported in creating updated and localised flood mapping.

This will ensure the appropriate siting and scale of mitigation infrastructure such as floodwalls, levees and culverts.

It will also help ensure that any future developments and projects are appropriately sited and climate resilient.

New and expanded culverts

RCV calls for funding to be provided – where assessed as necessary – for the construction of new culverts and expansion of existing culverts to ensure they are of the scale adequate to drain projected flood waters.

This would help prevent water-penetration of road surfaces and sub-surfaces, thereby minimising any road damage and potentially preventing damage to other infrastructure such as homes, businesses and other buildings.

Regularly clear obstructions

Funding is needed for regular (annual) clearing of weeds and other obstructions in flood channels, to ensure that flood waters are directed appropriately rather than being impeded and allowed to pool and damage roads and other infrastructure.

Rural councils need government support for emergencies

Councils are often called on in the wake of a natural disaster to provide on-the-ground support, support government agencies with local knowledge and to provide business support.

The 2022 floods followed hard on the heels of the Covid-19 pandemic, and a number of rural councils were also struck by the devastation of the 2019/20 bushfires.

Council staff have suffered burnout from dealing with these rolling crises.

Rural councils have small staff numbers and struggle to find the skills needed to assist with disaster mitigation and recovery.

Crises take already lean staffing allocations away from delivering on councils' core business to its communities.

Rural councils lack the capacity to continue dealing with rolling crises, such as the floods, the pandemic and bushfires.

Emergency management roles

Limitations prevent council staff from undertaking both emergency management roles

– e.g. Municipal Emergency Management Officers (MEMO) and Municipal Recovery Manager (MRM) – and Disaster Recovery Funding Arrangements (DRFA) funded roles.

This places additional financial and human resources stress on already depleted staffing pools in rural councils.

In rural areas, it is hard to attract appropriately qualified professionals for long-term flood recovery activities which will ultimately affect councils' infrastructure management outcomes.

Which is why longer-term government funding and support arrangements are needed.

Longer-term funding certainty needed for rural councils

Rural councils have no discretionary funding. They are funded year-to-year and each year they must petition state and federal government for funds through a variety of schemes.

This process is time consuming and wasteful for councils and for governments. It also means rural councils can't plan and invest for the future of their communities.

Rural councils, which have small rate bases, need funding certainty from state and federal governments, with a three-to-five-year horizon.

How the Victorian planning framework can ensure climate mitigation is a consideration in future planning decisions

The Victorian planning framework can be enhanced to ensure that inappropriate development does not occur in flood-prone areas or that development does not further contribute to climate change.

Embedded carbon should be reduced in new builds, refurbishments and repairs.

Substandard materials or construction methods that require additional or unnecessary heating and cooling, should be eliminated.

Implications for future planning decisions

The impacts of allowing any proposed development on land subject to flooding should be calculated and included as part of the decision-making process for development approval in line with current policy.

For councils to make informed decisions, all flood modelling studies must be reviewed and updated regularly. (See Flood mapping above.)

Any other related matters.

Roads

Victoria's rural roads network was significantly damaged by the flood event.

Pre-flood, many rural roads were already in a poor state.

Maintenance of rural Victoria's extensive road network is a significant task, even when conditions are positive.

Rural councils manage their local road maintenance responsibility and prudently.

However, in the face of small rate bases, unsettled climate conditions, heavy vehicle use, rate capping and reduced government grants there is far too much maintenance to do with far too few resources.

The continued lack of government investment in roads, maintenance, and infrastructure renewal, will have long-term impacts on the quality and safety of local roads across Victoria.

Road conditions not only impact local community movements. The road network is essential for transporting food, goods and resources to markets from our primary producers.

Good roads mean supply chains are uninterrupted and helps keep costs of transport to a minimum, leading to lower prices for families in supermarkets etc.

Build back better roads

A large portion of the rural road network is designed for transport trucks of up to seven-tonnes, but are now being used by heavy road trains and B-double trucks.

These heavy vehicles severely damage road surfaces that they share with school buses, local traffic and grey nomads.

The flood event has forced councils to replace sections of road which must be returned to the roads' original specification.

In many cases that means the roads are not compliant with new road management plans and are not capable of facilitating increased use by heavy vehicles.

Betterment is upward 33% more expensive but provides far better outcomes in terms of safety, suitability and durability.

Greater roads funding

State and federal governments need to establish greater funding for local roads to ensure that resources are adequate to ensure:

- roads and road assets are built back to an appropriate higher standard, and
- that any future road upgrades and/or repairs are also to that higher standard.

Road engineering and construction standards

RCV supports an ongoing review of road engineering and construction standards to enhance the resilience of future road construction to mitigate against flood damage.

The review should include:

- An expert committee with the powers and capability for the standards to be

reviewed regularly to take into consideration improvements in construction methods, materials and approaches and other relevant developments.

- A review of successful construction methods used internationally in areas that are subjected to natural disasters (particularly floods and wildfires).
- Any appropriate findings from the current Federal inquiry into the implications of severe weather events on the national regional, rural and remote road network.

Recovery timetable and attaining value

The time for completion of works funded by state and federal governments needs to be extended.

Natural disasters often strike across multiple areas. There are a limited number of contractors to undertake recovery and repair works – especially with so many state infrastructure projects underway in Victoria.

This means the prices paid to contractors in the immediate aftermath of an event are not good value and timelines for completing work through the funding guidelines are often not achievable.

Timeliness of response and recovery funding

In many areas, councils and community members were immediately ready to take action and clean up as flood waters subsided but action was delayed by a slow state response to recovery efforts, including requests for information regarding funding particularly in regards to waste and immediate needs.

Greater clarity on what could and couldn't be funded is still required. This information should be clear, consistent and easily accessible.

Timing of inquiry

The timing of post-disaster inquiries is inconvenient at best and impossible at worst.

People who are busy putting lives and communities back together while still in flood recovery mode are suddenly expected to respond to flood inquiries.

It is recommended that if government wants speedy inquiries, that they provide teams that can interview people in flood affected areas, collate their observations, gain approval from the interviewees for what is written and then report back to the appropriate agency or panel.

Claiming recovery expenses for councils

Government's piecemeal approach – such as adding additional items to be claimed – has created enormous unnecessary workload associated with backtracking and reconciling information, e.g. plant hire rates, day labour.

These additional funding options are welcome but late decisions to enable funding

result in additional workload pressure on already stretched staff.

RCV recommends that government formulates a standard approach to the recovery of expenses. This should be done in consultation with councils that have been impacted by recent floods and/or bushfires to ensure that the model is realistic and practical.

Other recommendations

1. Significantly increase the number of qualified Incident Controllers across Victoria to ensure the state's emergency services have the expertise needed to manage natural disasters, such as floods, bushfires and storms, as well as other emergency incidents.
2. Review structure for preparing for, and responding to, flood events, including communication and community engagement with communities and individuals most at risk, including reviewing all local VICSES Flood Guides and Flood Emergency Plans.
3. Review financial assistance and government grants available to support response and recovery from emergency events, at both individual and community level and ensure that this financial assistance is targeted and that barriers to accessing help are minimised.
4. Review major transport and connectivity routes and ensure that flood mitigation effort is targeted at keeping communities open and connected for as long as possible and that the isolation period is minimised.
5. Review the VicEmergency App to ensure that it is accurate and providing timely warnings that give people the opportunity to prepare and plan.
6. Develop a single point of trusted information across all government departments.
7. Install river gauges in strategic locations along the length of river systems and ensure that data is accessible to all.
8. Improve the sharing of information between agencies.
9. Improve digital connectivity across rural areas to address blackspots, including around key community hubs.
10. Provide funding to support digital literacy training and digital skill development across rural communities.
11. Resource the development of local level flood planning including information regarding Minor, Moderate and Major flood levels, and clear trigger points for preparedness action.
12. Resource the State Emergency Service appropriately to fulfill its Control agency role in response to major flooding.
13. Ensure that government and emergency service systems and Command and Control structures support a swift and equitable response across communities.
14. Resource councils appropriately to prepare better for and respond to emergency events, such as floods, bushfires, storms etc
15. Fully review the 2016 Victorian Floodplain Management Strategy in consultation with local government and the communities.
16. Plan and fund strategic rural levees, fixed crest weirs, and culverts to enable water to flow across active floodplains to a point where this water can re-enter natural water carriers.

17. Fund the repair of strategic breaches to rural levee banks across rural Victoria.
18. Provide funding for additional ring bank levees around homes for known high-risk flood locations.
19. Change the 'like for like' policy position with a 'build back better' policy position so that mistakes of the past are not repeated.
20. Establish responsibility for clearing and maintenance of waterways.
21. Purchase private land to return to the floodplain at strategic locations across the floodplain.
22. Increase understanding of river systems by relevant authorities to ensure that floods are managed better in the future.
23. Amend the Planning and Environment Act and the Climate Change Act to explicitly mandate addressing climate change at all levels of the planning process.
24. Require planning amendments at all levels of government, and at all levels of the planning framework, to include an assessment against relevant climate change considerations.
25. Introduce mandatory climate-change related minimum standards into planning schemes.
26. Conduct a study on community and property resilience of living in a flood prone area as part of the formal Recovery from the October-December 2022 floods.
27. Implement a formal system to increase property resilience to flooding such as the AHD displayed in meter boxes.
28. Investigate the insurance industry and how it responds to flood and other natural disasters.
29. Implement targeted education and community engagement in high-risk flood areas so that residents better understand how to prepare and are aware of appropriate response mechanisms to protect their properties from flood damage.